

Alleviating Psychological Distress Via Social Media: The Voices From Working-From-Home Malaysian Women

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Abstract

When Covid-19 outbreak hit the world, all countries were forced to be in strict quarantine for a period of time. This unforeseen event greatly impacted working women who made up 38.9% or 5.83 million of the total workforce in Malaysia as they were forced to work from home (WFH) on top of performing other different roles; a wife, mother, daughter as well as caretaker. There were no explicit guidelines in terms of time, space and roles in fulfilling the household and professional duties. This led them to experience psychological distress. Using a mixed- method approach via the use of open-ended questionnaires and online semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the challenges faced by these women, specifically those who live in urban and rural areas and how they used social networks to alleviate their distress. The findings indicate that women from both areas faced similar challenges and used the social networks correspondingly to overcome those challenges. Being informed

of this situation will help our working women to be more prepared and resilient should a similar global pandemic emerge in the future.

Keywords: women, working from home, psychological distress, Covid-19

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured peoples' lives around the globe. It forces people to make sudden changes in their way of living, working and interacting. To reduce the spread of the outbreak, the Malaysian government imposed quarantines and this forced the workplaces, schools and leisure places to be shut down for a period of time. Workers who were not in the frontlines were instructed to work remotely from their homes. This regulation has substantially affected one's work and family lives. Working women, especially mothers, have to adapt to these changes quickly. Unfortunately, not many working mothers were able to cope effortlessly as the quarantine period led to anxiety, stress and strain in terms of their physical, mental, social and financial aspects. The number of Malaysian women in the labour force during the second quarter of 2020 was almost 40% of the total number of the national human resources (Department of Statistics, 2020). While women are becoming indispensable in the workforce, they still continue to wear different hats as wives, mothers, daughters and caretakers of others. Due to this, Umi Adzlin Silim et al. (2011) noted that these women are more prone and vulnerable to psychological distress and depression.

Thus, during the Covid-19 pandemic, a majority of these women turned to social networks to overcome the challenges they faced in having to work and care for the family all at the same time. Since they had to be at home and limit their physical contact, social networks provided the much-needed comfort for them to convey their feelings and concerns. It also gave them the support which they gravely yearned for.

The social support from others via online has been considered as one of the major stress coping mechanisms (So Young Bae et al., 2020).

Therefore, this research addressed the following questions:

1. *What are the challenges faced by women working from home ?*
2. *What are the roles of social networks in reducing their psychological distress when working from home?*

Significance of the Research

This research is significant in identifying the challenges encountered by women WFH which affected their psychological distress during the pandemic. It also identifies the roles of social networks as an avenue for these women to alleviate their psychological distress. It is hoped that the findings of this study will educate women, especially the working ones, to respond to the future crisis.

Literature review

The Mental Health of Women Working from Home

Working from home is a double-edged sword. Although it allows women to work and stay within the comfort of their homes, there are a lot of challenges they face every day. For example, the mental health of women who work from home is an issue that has gone mostly unnoticed, but it is one that deserves attention. As more and more women work from home since the emergence of Covid-19, the risk of developing mental health problems increases. Umi Adzlin Silim et al., (2011) found that 22.8% of married working women in Malaysia are psychologically distressed, 16% have severe psychological distress or probable depressive disorders, and 5.5% have clinical

depression, which was under-diagnosed and not treated.

In addition, women are more likely than men to experience mental health problems. They also report higher rates of depression and anxiety. There is a growing body of research that suggests that the level of isolation experienced by women working from home can lead to higher levels of depression and anxiety, as well as lower levels of productivity. In a recent study by Hayes, et al. (2020), it was highlighted that women working from home reported higher levels of stress and anxiety than those who work in the office setting.

Furthermore, a research by Vimala Balakrishnan et al. (2021) found that Malaysian women have trouble coping during the pandemic. Some participants in the survey even contemplated

suicide as they felt really depressed. While the government has laid out financial assistance to the affected individuals and households during the MCO, social support must also be provided to this group of citizens. Apart from the mental health centres that are already available physically, online avenues should be developed too, as when a pandemic strikes, physical contact is prohibited. Hence, online social support may benefit these working women in getting the help they need.

The Use of Social Networks Among Working-from-Home Women

Women working from home are more likely to feel socially isolated and for this reason are more likely to use social networks as a means of creating connections in order to cope with stress, depression and anxiety. Some studies identify a positive relationship between increased Facebook use and lower levels of psychological distress (Ziv-Gal et al., 2016; Soto-Pinto et al., 2017). Additionally, in some cases, the use of social networks during COVID-19 can reduce psychological distress given that greater networking

activity is reported by participants who were able to collaborate with friends in virtual settings. These findings are based on recent studies examining how social interactions with friends and family via different modes affect mental health (Luukkonen et al., 2018).

In Malaysia, several studies are looking into the use of social networks. Hamid et al, (2013) investigated social media use among university students, while Thang Siew Ming (2014), under the UKM-MCMC collaboration, investigated the impact of social networking apps on Malaysian secondary school students. Besides that, several studies also looked into the disadvantages of social media. For example, Faridah Nazir et al. (2020) investigated a case study on social media addiction among Malaysians while Heikal Husin & Nurul Malim, (2016) investigated the use of social media among children. However, in our local context, not many studies have looked or are looking into the use of social networks among working women and

how they use social networks to get the social support needed to help them face the challenges during the pandemic. Therefore, this research aimed to provide answers for these questions.

Conceptual framework

Psychological distress

According to Arvidsdotter et al. (2016), psychological distress consists of three types of psychological problems in the community namely depression, anxiety and stress. Some of the common symptoms of depression are lack of sleep, loss of appetite, lack of concentration, fatigue, continuous feeling of sadness or moodiness and loss of interest in activities perceived as rewarding or enjoyable. As for anxiety, it is

characterised by physical symptoms such as a rise in blood pressure, sweating, rapid heartbeat, dizziness which are triggered due to recurring intrusive or worrying thoughts. Meanwhile, stress is the body's natural reactions towards new, unexpected circumstances that might be threatening in nature where one has little or no control. The Covid-19 pandemic is significantly associated with psychological distress since healthcare policies require people to be in lockdown and to practice social distancing. People are compelled to abide by the rules and regulations during the lockdown and quarantine period. As a consequence, many people have reported experiencing psychological distress during the course of the pandemic.

Social networks

During Covid-19 pandemic, the Internet has taken a lead toward an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies (Rahul, 2020). Social networks especially, which entail the use of internet-based social media sites, became the ultimate means for people to connect with each other without any physical interaction. In this respect, Tajfel's and Turner's (1986) social identity theory comes into the picture. According to this theory, humans as social beings always

crave a sense of belonging or the notion of 'we-ness' (www.britannica.com). From the psychological perspective, the element of social connectedness provides a curative potential to the people, particularly during the pandemic, to reduce loneliness and increase self-esteem and happiness (Jetten et al., 2014). Hence, based on this social identity theory, this research attempted to discern how social networks were utilised by women WFH to reduce their psychological distress during the pandemic.

Psychological capitals

According to Luthan, et al. (2007), psychological capitals refers to "an individual's positive psychological state of development" which is strongly connected with "increased mental wellbeing and levels of satisfaction with life and work". The four main elements in this concept are called HERO; Hope, Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism. The following definitions are adopted from Graberek (2018).

(a) Hope

Hope means having the drive or motivation to accomplish specific goals. It sees the interaction between the agency (goals) and pathways (ways to achieve the goals). It also includes possessing alternative approaches and knowledge in adjusting them to achieve the targeted goals.

(b) Efficacy / Self-efficacy

It refers to a person's strong level of confidence in themselves that they are able to overcome any kind of life obstacles that come their way. They are not easily discouraged by failures as they know they have the skill and knowledge to overcome those failures.

(c) Resilience

It refers to one's ability to regain one's former state after going through some adversities in life. They are able to stay strong and navigate through the tough times they experience to attain success.

(d) Optimism

It means having positive thoughts even in times of hardship and expecting positive outcomes in the future. Optimistic individuals are always motivated to give their best to achieve their goals where any issues they encounter will be dealt with immediately. The interconnectedness of these concepts which constitutes the conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

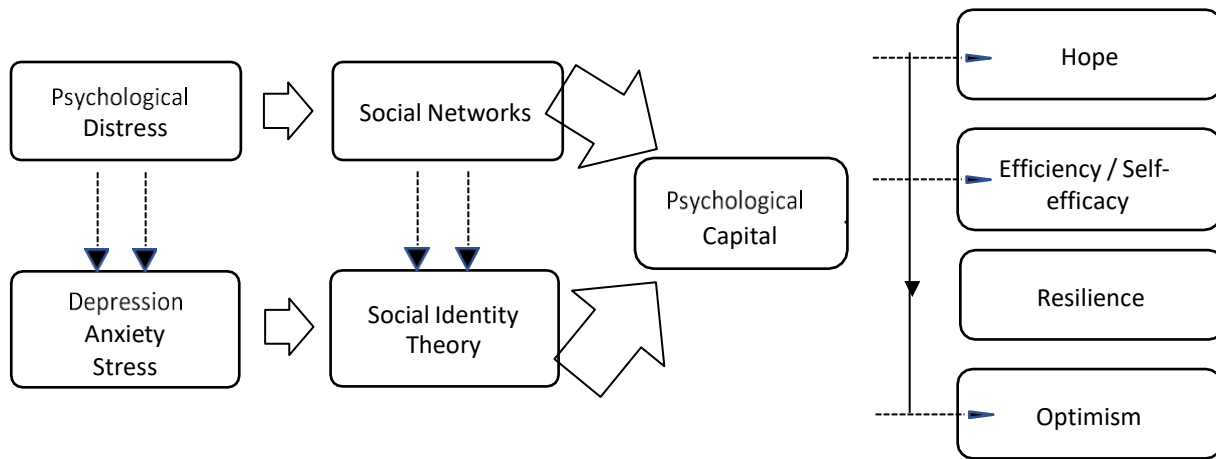


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This research used a mixed method approach; quantitative and qualitative. The first phase utilised surveys while the second phase used interviews as the main instrument. A set of questionnaires comprising quantitative and qualitative items via Google Form were distributed in July 2021. The questionnaire survey was designed to determine their socio-demographic characteristics, psychosocial and marital status, social/emotional status, health status (including mental health), life satisfaction and income brackets. For the purpose of these research objectives, only the data from the participants’ background and open-ended sections will be analysed. A total of 457 working women participated in the survey. 413 or 90% of them are residing in the

urban areas while 44 or 10% of them are in the rural areas. Frequency count and descriptive analysis were employed in the findings analysis of the survey. In the second phase, the qualitative data were gathered by conducting online semi-structured interviews. The method was used to obtain data from these participants on their lifestyle, work environment, family integration and personal response in life distress due to their work at home careers. 18 respondents representing different areas (13 from urban areas and 5 from rural areas) were chosen to be interviewed. The interview sessions were conducted via Google Meet. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti software to get the answers for both research questions. The interviewees' identities will be addressed using the following code; UP1-13 and RP1-5. UP stands for Urban Participant and RU stands for Rural Participant.

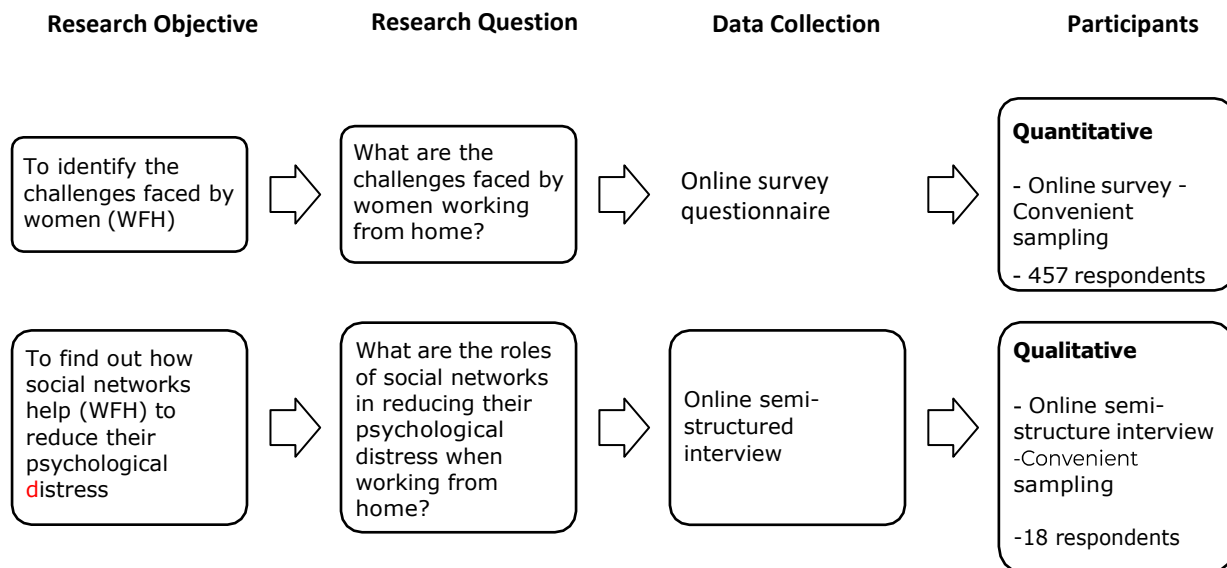


Figure 2: Research Design

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Objective 1: Challenges faced by women WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 1 below shows the challenges faced by women WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic based on their locality - urban and rural.

CHALLENGES	NUMBER OF QUOTES		
	Urban	Rural	Quotes
Adapt to new norm - stressful	4	0	4
Boring routine	3	0	3
Children online learning - stressful	17	0	17
Lack of interaction	17	3	20
Family matters/handling children	18	3	21
Unconducive working environment	9	0	9
Internet connection	23	4	27
Juggling different responsibilities (work/family)	102	13	115
Lack of energy, sleep, rest and eat	3	2	5
Lack of social support	6	1	7
Long hours of being indoor	1	0	1
Lack of focus on work due to family	27	3	30
Low self-esteem, not confident	1	0	1
Need for more gadget/update IT skill	5	0	5
Limited activity/dormant life	2	1	3
Time management - too many things to handle	28	0	28
Difficult to remain positive/discipline	3	0	3
Lack of resources to get work done	38	2	40
Work related (teaching challenges)	26	2	28
Workload and long working hours	35	7	42
	368	41	409

An overall analysis of the survey questions indicated that the top three main challenges faced by women WFH in the urban and rural areas are similar (highlighted in grey) which are:

- (1) juggling different responsibilities,
- (2) carrying heavy workload and working long hours, and
- (3) lacking the resources to get work done

During Covid-19 quarantine period, women found themselves juggling the roles of working mother and employee, often balancing multiple priorities and responsibilities within their own home. 115 quotes were recorded for juggling different responsibilities, in which 102 (28%) came from respondents in the urban areas while 13 (32%) came from those in the rural areas. Several participants commented:

"WFH does work for me but since I have one son, it is a bit difficult for me because I have to prepare meals, attend classes, I need to adapt with schedules, I can't imagine if I have more than one kid."

"I started working from home in March 2020, starting from the first MCO and up here end of April 2021 which I had to resign due to various issues and one of the reason because I have to work from home and it have taken a lot of call to my mental issues, I decided to resign and apart from charging between work from home and looking after the children and children learning from home, it has taken a lot of my stress, it was too much for me."

"It's very frustrating because I have to juggle things with my child and also with the house. You have to make sure your house is clean because you have a child at home. And on top of that, I have to attend meetings and prepare stuff. So, there's a lot of time management issues and a lot of conflicts when it comes to time. And because you do a lot of these things, you tend to become very tired. So, I'll try to do a bulk of my work at night. It's like it's not doable because I'm so tired, and the cycles repeated everyday (participant communicate with her child). And then of course, on top of that, when she

was at home full time, she also had online classes and it's a very specific time and sometimes it's very difficult to pick in my schedule. And the preparations for those courses even at childcare is a lot, so it took a lot of my time away from, you know, potential time to do work. So, it became very frustrating everyday and it built up pretty quickly."

An analysis of the participants' accounts of their work and family lives during the COVID-19 lockdown in the excerpts above reveals that women, especially mothers from both areas, have spent more time in domestic duties on top of their professional responsibilities. Taking care of the house, children and their schools' needs required detailed attention from these WFH women. This imposed a prominent challenge to them in dividing the time to complete all tasks. The participants' accounts of their WFH situation revealed that they were overwhelmed by their domestic duties. When they were too tired, they easily felt stressed out. Heggeness and Fields (2020) found that during the pandemic, mothers may experience greater stress increases than non-mothers because of school closures and increased child care demands. It is also

interesting to note that only a few participants mentioned that they received help from their spouse in managing their household. This is in line with a study by Meyer et. al. (2021) where they found that women tend to have no partner support when WFH and men are less likely to receive negative impact from WFH. The situation may be less detrimental to women' psychological states if their spouses help together to manage domestic chores.

The second challenge that they faced was having to work long hours. 42 quotes were recorded for this challenge with 35 from urban respondents and 7 from rural respondents.

The following are some excerpts taken from the participants' response in regards to working long hours.

"I can't count the day I have not work. There has not been a day that I have not work. So everyday since the lockdown, I've been working. So I think that's where the blurry lines are in terms of when work starts and where work ends so it's just like perpetually working for the last two years."

" I've felt that employers think that you are working from home and you readily available for 24/7, and the boundaries at work became, while, there were lack of boundaries at work pun, initially before the pandemic. But, I think when you work from home, the employers think that, it's a free for all because you are always available and this assumptions that you are always available at home so it added to my stress because I've get an email at nights semua kan."

"Kecewa bila boss tidak kenal batasan waktu."

"Bekerja lebih masa drpd di pejabat."

"Lebih penat dr keje kat office."

Based on the excerpts above, the women expressed their concerns about working long hours. They highlighted that their employer expected work to be done even at night as some of them received work request messages until late at night. In fact, some of them indicated that WFH was more demanding than working at the office. Fukushima et al. (2021) carried out a study on 1239 employees WFH and found that

work takes most of their time when WFH and it made them less physically active and less leisure time at home. This would in turn affect their well-being as well.

As for lack of resources to get work done, 40 quotes were recorded where 38 came from urban respondents and 2 came from rural respondents. Below are some excerpts from the participants' interview responses.

"There are times when internet coverage is disrupted and weak. Definitely interrupting tasks while attending online or webinar meetings"

"Some materials are only available at the office."

"Masalah line internet yang kadang-kadang mengganggu semasa bersiaran langsung perbincangan."

"Cumanya kerja saya dengan murid-murid terjejas kerana bukan semua murid-murid ada peranti yang eloklah."

Hasan et al. (2020) highlighted that employees that are in the rural areas were barely able to perform work from home due to the lack of resources such as Internet coverage and the nature of their work itself. However, in this research also, only two quotes came from women who live in the rural areas. It could be that while they live in rural areas, the Internet was sufficient for them to carry out their duties. Nonetheless, lack of resources such as gadgets also contributed to the challenges that these women faced. Having a good Internet connection is pointless if resources such as devices are not sufficient. This could affect how a woman performs her responsibilities as found by Siti Aisyah (2020) that the nature of work and the lack of

resources may indeed hinder the effectiveness of working from home in some communities.

Research Objective 2: The role of the Internet in alleviating psychological distress

In the open-ended section in the survey as well as during the interview, the respondents were asked on how they make use of the social networks in coping with psychological distress. In general, the Internet (including social networks) have helped them in three ways;

1. as a platform to care for and help others,
2. as a platform to seek knowledge/self-improvement,
3. a platform to communicate

Further details and discussion on the roles of Internet are presented below.

Table 2.1: Category 1 - A platform to share, care for and help others

No.	Sub-themes	No. of Quotes		
		Urban	Rural	Quotes
1	A platform for sharing and provide support	52	7	59
2	A platform to be relieved from stress	40	3	43
3	A platform to combat depression/ mental illness	31	3	34
4	A platform for caring	8	0	8
5	A platform for specific groups or purposes	5	0	5

Based on the tables above, social media is mainly used as a platform to care for and help others, specifically catered for people who are facing some life challenges due to psychological distress. Both urban and rural WFH women agreed that social media enables them to handle their depression or mental health effectively. They get to receive and provide the much-needed support which helps them to relieve their stress. Some participants highlighted:

RP6:

"Sangat membantu sebab bila waktu rehat saya akan buka apps seperti YouTube untuk dengar apa-apa terutama macam contoh webinar yang macam untuk saya dari segi untuk parenting, dari segi untuk kerja. Lepas tu, untuk relax saya akan ke Twitter atau Instagram. kalau Instagram kita itu la kan dapat tengok gambar, video dan twitter pun."

UP1:

"Social media allows and creates safe spaces for women to share experiences and give support anonymously."

UP14:

It allows you to take a few minutes off from WFH burden to recharge, it allows you to communicate in a community and find support."

Table 2.2 Category 2 - A platform to seek knowledge/self-improvement

No.	Sub-themes	No. of Quotes		
		Urban	Rural	Quotes
1	A platform to spread positivity	54	9	63
2	A platform to seek knowledge	50	3	53
3	A platform to keep updated with current news	6	1	7
		Urban	Rural	Quotes

Besides that, social media have enabled these WFH women to seek knowledge/self-improvement by spreading positivity among the masses and keeping themselves updated with current news. This increase in content has given them a way to stay updated on current news and issues, as well as allowing them to connect with others around the world as shown in the excerpts below.

UP1:

"There are a lot of resources for mental health and also positive messages out there to help people not feel so alone."

UP16:

"Bagi akak, media sosial memang membantu mengurangkan dan tidak bagi bebanan stress ke apa lah dekat akak sebab akak boleh baca boleh tengok perkembangan apa benda dekat luar. Kalau sebelum ni kan kita tak boleh pergi mana-mana kan, duduk je dekat rumah, pergi je kerja. Tapi, dengan tengok Facebook ke tengok Instagram ke, akak boleh tahu lah pasal perkembangan tu, boleh hubung, boleh tahu pasal keluarga dekat kampung, melalui itu lah."

RP4:

"Work-wise, we use social media a lot, to communicate and share information."

RP13

"I would good and helpful because its help me to connect with people while I connect physically with friend and people. It helps us to still catch up with people."

Table 2.3 Category 3 - A platform to communicate

No.	Sub-themes	No. of Quotes		
		Urban	Rural	Quotes
1	A platform to communicate	51	5	56
2	A platform to build rapport with colleagues	4	0	4

Finally, social media was also found to enhance communication and build rapport with colleagues as noted by the participants' responses below.

RP4:

"We do get a lot of support from each other who are in the same situation, like WFH mums, a lot of kids, and their own PPR. So, we do share all this emotion and all to keep our sanity intact."

RPX:

"Kita tak keluar jumpa orang, kita tak ada connection, even kawan-kawan yang seoffice pun, kita communicate melalui zoom sahaja. Tak ada physical punya ni kan. So, it's actually quite membantu kita untuk released kita punya burnout."

"Itu pun bagus juga lah sebab tak ada lah kata kita tak tahu perkembangan luar kan bila duduk dekat rumah, sekurang-kurangnya bila kita bukak Facebook, kita tahu lah perkembangan dekat luar, berkaitan PKP ke, COVID apa semua itu kan. Jadi, bagi akak bagus lah, tak ada lah kita sekadar buat kerja apa semua tak ada benda benda macam tu, berhubung dengan kawan-kawan, nak tanya kerja semua kan, boleh lah."

The excerpts above clearly show that social media can facilitate communication among WFH women. This finding is further supported by Weinstein (2018) and Sohrabi (2020) who opined that social media platforms offer multiple benefits such as helping users to communicate with others and reduce loneliness.

Conclusion

Generally, it could be concluded that women WFH faced many challenges, especially in balancing several roles such as mothers, wives, employees and caretakers all at

once. Besides that, they also had to do heavy workloads and work long hours. Lacking resources to get their work done was also one of the main problems they encountered when working from home. This situation has led the majority of them to harbor negative feelings such as agitation, annoyance, stress and so on. Nonetheless, in alleviating their psychological distress, almost all of these women turned to social networks to get the additional support that they need. Social networks provided the platform and support to these women and its huge potential could be leveraged to provide effective and sustainable support for women in Malaysia's urban and rural areas in alleviating psychological distress while WFH.

**Throughout this research the terms 'social networks' and 'social media' are used interchangeably due to their intricate associations.*

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